



Pick Your Path to Health

Spirituality—Finding the Strength Within

"Are you healthy?"

When most of us hear this question, we consider our physical health. Are our doctors concerned about our present weight? Is our blood pressure in line with what it should be? Do we exercise and eat right?

We pay attention to our physical health because there are specific, recognizable results. We feel the effects of cigarette smoking. Our waistlines reflect a high calorie diet.

But what about our spiritual health? Doctors are now pointing to real medical benefits that come from achieving and maintaining a healthy spiritual life. No longer is our physical well-being the sole barometer that defines our overall health; the satisfaction we derive from our spiritual life also plays a part.

As we start a new year, it is useful to look at our spiritual health needs and explore ways, if we wish, to improve this aspect of our lives-this aspect that is central to who we are and how we live our lives. Our spiritual health is much harder to measure than our physical health. A blood test won't tell us how we're doing. And spiritual health can be even harder to quantify because spirituality, itself, means something totally different to everyone.

What is spirituality?

"Spirituality is an awareness of the divine or sacred core that underlies everyday life," says Sandra Hassink, M.D., a pediatrician at the Alfred I. DuPont Hospital for Children in Wilmington, Delaware. Kids Health, a Web site sponsored by The Nemours Foundation, further references Hassink's definition: "It is an ongoing search for meaning, and this may involve an appreciation for creation and the natural world as well as traditional spiritual paths."

Spirituality takes many forms. Some women fulfill their spiritual needs through religious prayer and ritual, and the benefits of such practices are becoming more apparent and more appreciated. According to research published by Kids Health, "Patients undergoing open-heart surgery who received strength and comfort from their religion were three times more likely to survive than those who had no religious ties."

Additional research suggests that "people who attend religious services, or who feel they are spiritual, experience lower levels of depression and anxiety; display signs of better health, such as lower blood pressure and fewer strokes; and say they generally feel healthier," notes John Cutter, WebMD Medical News.

Are there other ways to express spirituality?

Participation in organized religion is only one way of tapping into one's spirituality. Millions of women are revising their definition of spirituality and finding ways to get in touch with themselves through journal writing, art, volunteer work, or quiet reflection. Yoga and meditation are growing in popularity and are now recognized as scientifically-endorsed means of quieting the mind and eliciting calm. Physicians recommend the "alternative" therapies of yoga and meditation for such varying conditions as cancer, diabetes, arthritis, asthma, migraine, and AIDS.

For the athletic at heart, a morning walk in the woods or an evening jog along a quiet path can be a great way to get in touch with one's spirituality. Activities that take place in nature, like the other activities highlighted above, allow the mind to become still, and it is in this state that spirituality is most likely to evolve.

Now what?

Think about new ways to explore your own spirituality. Find a spiritual outlet that feels right-whether it is through a faith institution, yoga or meditation, art, exercise, or another means. The physical and mental health benefits of tapping into spirituality are enormous. Growing your spiritual life may do more than increase your inner awareness. It may help you grow overall on your path to better health.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For other tips on improving your health, or for more information on the ***Pick Your Path to Health*** campaign, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>.